

Garden in Motion – an Experience of Citizens Involvement in Public Space Regeneration

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1 ABSTRACT

The paper illustrates a Placemaking process developed in Potenza Municipality (Southern Italy), based on an interpretation of the theories by the French landscape architect Gilles Clément. A laboratory has been organized in a residual area of the city, famous for an architectural monument, the bridge designed by Sergio Musmeci. The Internet allows a continuous online storytelling of work, creating citizens engagement on projects or choices and producing creativity and knowledge circulation. In this perspective "Garden in Motion" initiative produced new important processes for the community life, just like in Gilles Clément's "Garden in motion", where the processes of nature are favoured and spontaneous plants put in condition to grow and move freely.

2 INTRODUCTION

In recent years protests frequently occurred in cities all over the world. Generally, symbols of such protests are parks, but behind parks, people claim an improvement of urban quality, more services, a greater involvement in decisions and more generally a better quality of life and a wider welfare.

Last year the international public opinion supported the protests in Turkey to save Gezi Park, one of the last small green spaces in Beyoğlu (Istanbul), which was threatened by a shopping centre project. During the latter days, new protests occurred in Turkey, which led to social networking ban. This suggests that even 2013 protests were directed to a request of democracy increase and Gezi Park was just a symbol, a way to gather more attention.

Jacobs (1961) observed that quality of life was closely linked to the ability of a community to self determine its conditions of everyday life. The greater is self organization ability, the wider are the possibilities of producing social capital.

In order to support this kind of activities, Davidoff (1965) argues that the role of a planner should not only be limited to analyse social problems and try to propose possible solutions, but he should be a sort of "advocate" of categories that do not have enough power and financial resources, able to mediate between the plurality of community interests, in order to pursue the general interest.

The situation highlighted by Davidoff fifty years ago is still current today; the representativeness of several groups of citizens continues to be a problem accentuated by increasing gap between citizens and institutions. This is mainly due to the typical decision maker's behaviour, principally concentrated in relationships with self-referring groups with the only purpose to protect their interests rather than to listen to the community.

Great part of urban renewal programmes can reach, in the best cases, the medium level of Arnstein Ladder (1969); consequently citizens do not believe in public participation involvement or prefer other more bottom-up forms, such as Placemaking (Schneekloth and Shibley, 1995).

This approach has been applied in Potenza, a small municipality located in southern Italy, following some initiatives pursued by several local associations. An abandoned area, important for its architectural symbols, has been chosen in order to build a participatory design process and to give back to the city a shared space with no public expense.

This activity led to a working group composed by architects, sociologists, engineers, journalists and philosophers, called "Garden in motion". "Garden in motion" is also a bottom-up urban renewal project of an abandoned space in Potenza municipality, famous for an architectural monument, the bridge designed by

Sergio Musmeci. This area, for a lot of time used as an uncontrolled parking, has been transformed into a garden, with children playground and spaces for walking, reading and cultural events.

On July 2013, the above mentioned group organized a free workshop involving young architects, engineers and agronomists. The area below Musmeci Bridge has been cleaned and analysed; existing plants have been catalogued. Participants studied possibilities of space use, also interviewing local residents and listening to old tales: Who lived there? Was there a community? Who does frequent the area now?

At the end of the research, workshop participants proposed some designs in order to decorate the area. Proposals have been published (online/offline) and shared with citizens. The final project has been developed with the voluntary participation of many citizens.

3 THE STORY OF “GARDEN IN MOTION” EXPERIENCE: TOWN INVOLVEMENT AND STORYTELLING

Sirky (2010), describing communities development patterns or interest groups, states that groups managing problems of collective resources assume the shared respect of cooperation rule.

In most cases a strong interest towards a problem\good\space makes the spontaneous action of involved people more effective, than previous policies adopted in good management by responsible Agencies\Local Authorities.

Today we are immersed in technology with continuous connections which improve ideas and experiences exchange.

The stronger is knowledge circulation, the greater is community growth. For this reason, citizens participation in urban space design and management has consequences, also in terms of innovation.

Digital approaches and technologies also allow to build a strong storytelling of community actions, able to go much farther than city limits. It is possible to build an internal engagement, to activate citizens on projects or choices and produce circulation creativity and knowledge. It is no longer to promote actions or projects, such as a marketing bottom-up participation.



Fig. 1: Citizens working to realize the "Garden in motion".

3.1 The context and the engagement

The internet and the great possibilities offered by digital technologies allow us to tell the experience, making sure that the story becomes part of the experience itself.

The context is typical of a provincial town, which grew haphazardly, with an increasing poverty, little investment in services by local authorities and lack of experience in citizens participatory processes.

The choice of the area to be regenerated is not random: it is an abandoned area, forgotten by the institutions, behind a monument of great architectural value, but almost unknown in the city, Musmeci bridge.

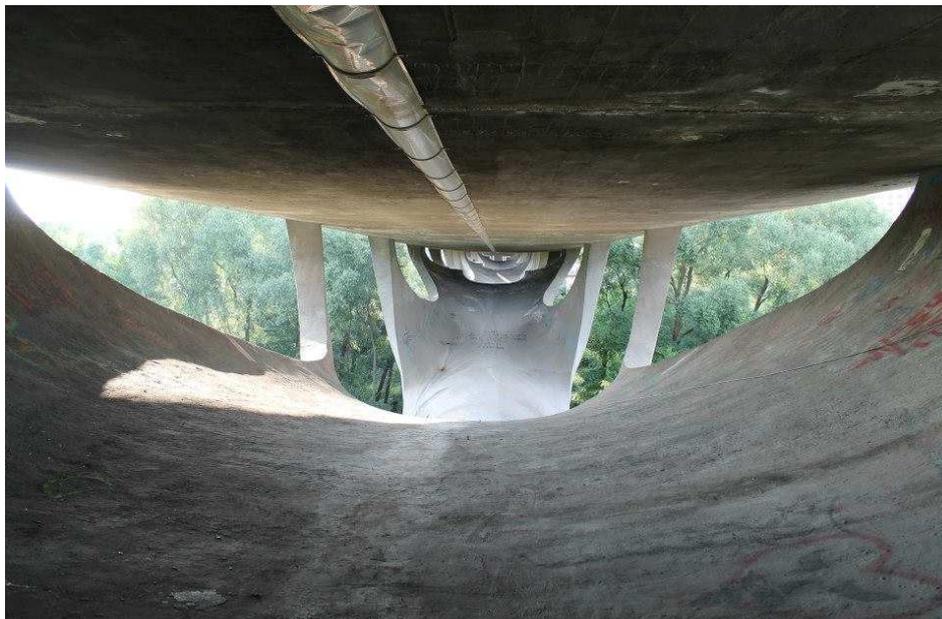


Fig. 2: The underside of Musmeci Bridge.

During a workshop, some practitioners - agronomists, sociologists, architects, engineers - put the area under observation and designed a number of proposals with zero impact.

The first phase, analysis of the space below the bridge, collaborative design of some furniture and design of communication campaign, had a very strong impact on citizens.

The continuous online storytelling of work (blogs, social networks, wiki approaches) added news about hyperlocal context to mainstream. But it was mainly the online space to explain the story of what was happening in the city. Also, this space has been built in a participatory and spontaneous way using pictures, text and comments. The population was made curious with small actions based on urban games.

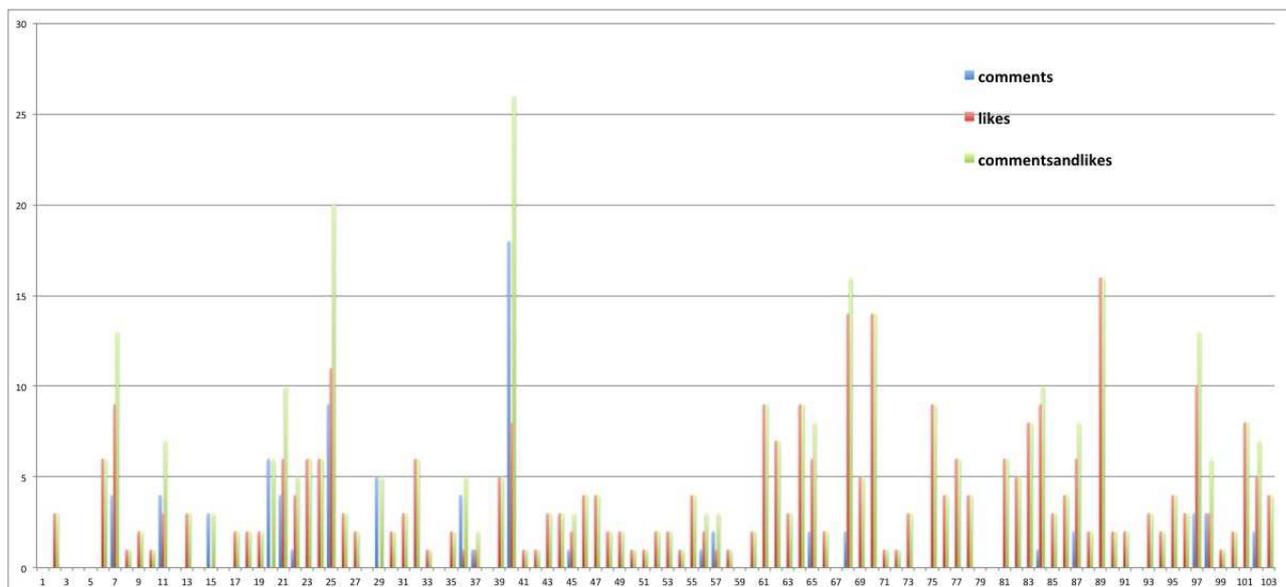


Fig. 3: Number of Likes and Comments on “Garden in motion” Facebook group.

The participation to storytelling experiment design has become a way to participate to the entire project development and to the regeneration of the identified space.



Fig. 4: The urban game created to promote the initiative in the city and to engage citizens.

Some plants, for example, have been disseminated in the city, photographed, geolocated, posted on the internet. Without receiving instructions, citizens began to track the traces of the game, joining to the story.

Meanwhile, the exposition of project proposals prepared by practitioners represented a further inclusion invitation for other citizens. Which project would you choose? Citizens have commented, selected, suggested, becoming both part of the “Garden in Motion community” and active nodes.

At the same time traders, private enterprises, administrators encouraged by the enthusiasm created around the initiative, helped providing materials, equipments, and even food.

Hundreds have joined to the second phase, mainly based on the construction of the furniture of the area under Musmeci bridge. This number of participants was almost unexpected for the reality of the city. That community was then able to supervise the area.

The storytelling of the positive experience of “Garden in Motion” has activated new interest in associations, artists, single citizens that have filled the area of cultural events, according to a logic of cooperation, proposing new ideas.

Weinberg (2012) highlights that network is always smarter than individuals, even when the latter are very skilled. It is in the network that ideas are mixed, taken together, combined, revised. It is also a matter of community connections.

4 WHY THAT PLACE, WHY THE MONUMENT

“Garden in Motion” is an initiative testing an innovative approach to design and suggests a different way to enjoy a monument, to live an urban fragment, to take care of a collective space.

Based on an interpretation of the theories by the French landscape architect Gilles Clément, especially related to the concepts of third landscape and Garden in Motion, it was decided to conduct a laboratory located in a residual area of the city of Potenza, in proximity to the bridge crossing Basento river, designed by the Italian architect Sergio Musmeci.



Fig. 5: An external view of Musmeci Bridge.

This bridge was built at the end of the sixties of the last century and it is one of the few elements of architectural interest in Potenza city.

The bridge was built entirely with reinforced concrete and its forms are the result of a complex engineering research conducted by Musmeci, who pursued the maximum correspondence between shape and structure.

The result is a work characterized by a complex and unexpected spatiality, perceived through the pedestrian path under his deck, which offers picturesque views and interactions with the river landscape and the city.

Because of these values the bridge was recognized in 2003, among the first Italian works of contemporary architecture under the protection by the Ministry of Heritage and Cultural Activities, becoming a monument like Coliseum and Santa Maria del Fiore.

The importance of the relationship between the monument and the environmental context in which it is placed had already been affirmed by Venice Charter in 1964 and placed in the centre of the action of protection. Later on, the declaration ICOMOS of Xi'An (2005) reiterated the importance of the contribution that the context provides to the value of the monument.

The relationship with natural environment, past and present social practices, uses and activities and other forms of intangible heritage that create form and space have been included in that concept.

The same declaration also paid attention to the importance of documentation understanding environment interpretation in inclusive and multidisciplinary ways.

4.1 A social laboratory as a means of protection

Focusing the attention on the bridge as a monument, Garden in Motion represented an important moment of awareness of its monumental value and an opportunity to build new communitarian values.

The context has been studied and analyzed in all its aspects: results of these analyses were the basis of the design workshop and interventions implementation.

Great emphasis was placed on community education and public awareness to achieve conservation objectives and to improve means of protection and management.

A new awareness of the importance of the relationship between the monument and the context has been the basis of subsequent activities of collective use of the area.



Fig. 6: Garden in Motion Building.

In this perspective, the "Garden in Motion" initiative has given (and continues to give) its contribution in the activation of some processes of great importance for the life of a community, just like in Gilles Clément's Garden in motion, where the processes of nature are favoured and spontaneous plants put in condition to grow and move freely. The interest in the monument and the participation to social dynamics are like seeds of wild plants sown in a field.

In this sense, and according to the etymological interpretation of the term "monument", the "Garden in Motion" experience activated human and social energies fundamental in a community life that not only transformed the physical environment of the bridge, but they also created a number of perception practices and a place usage.

5 THE CITY DESIGNED WITH A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH: THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL SPACES

Participation can be defined as a dichotomy between formal and informal spaces such as the collective contribution to urban design, through activism phenomena of that trigger informal spaces, starting from critics to functionalism patterns, which ultimately would lead to estrangement and liabilities between citizens.

In order to better specify what kind of functionalism is referenced in the project for the city it is useful to start from critics by Lefebvre (1993) opposed to this sociological theory.

Lefebvre considers functionalism as a coincidence between rationality and functionality that would bring function to create reality. He states that "the new cities showed merits and deficiencies, more evident than merits, of functionalism, when it wants to create the framework and the conditions of daily life."

A space between the formal place of the city, designed and planned without any participation form of the future users will be a place with almost exclusively unique ways of interaction. People living that space are unable to have unusual behaviours, compared to the prescribed forms, without being accused of madness.

Considering a kind of anachronistic functionalism, still contemplated today, the city designed and governed without participatory paths appears to be a space of silence.

The silence, defined as lack of response to the aims proposed in the city project, is the nourishment for the continuous replication of formal places.

Apathy that characterizes citizens could be generated by situations described in the International Situationist (1958): "It is important to redevelop the area around them, to build for them, without distracting them from worries transmitted through the eyes and ears".

The city expands leaving on one side empty places without function and on the other side multiplying functions and places consumption, transforming its inhabitants in space consumers.

On one hand there are formal places that require feasible behaviours and actions only if recognized in dominating economic and social system, on the other hand at the edge of the city are located the informal places that allow intents sharing.

Away from the project, the "manufacturer" inhabitant in empty spaces of the city claims his right of movement and action, which up to nowadays has been denied.

In several cases. the "design machine" does not give meaning and function to informal spaces if they are not attractors of economic interests.

All this brings us to an issue dealt with by Lefebvre: the Right to the City.



Fig. 7: Garden in Motion Building.

The re-appropriation of informal spaces by single or informal groups of citizens through reuse or urban regeneration actions are an expression of the rights to the city as an active proposition in countering individuals separation and specialization of places imposed by formal city.

Controlling behaviours and actions that people practicing in the interstices of free cities, like simple deviance from the common sense, is reductive because they are not the result of individual strategies of re-appropriation, implemented according to place characteristics, but acts more or less aware of collective design of places and their potentiality.

Harvey (2008) argues that the "right to the city" is more than an individual freedom to access to resources offered by town, but it is the right to change ourselves by changing the city.

While individuals and individuality are not recognizable in informal spaces, it is possible to outline political and organization aspects that collectivity uses to govern the informal space.

5.1 Application of this approach to "Garden in Motion experience"

The basic idea was to induce to a garden design taking into account informal uses of Potenza, which citizens already put into practice in that place.

In addition, there was the will to second, using the term adopted by Clement, informality of place, through a proposal of self-built furniture, connections with formal city and construction of a privileged point of view of Musmeci bridge.

"The aesthetics of natural disorder", as defined by Clement have been reproduced in the first phase of the workshop through analysis of needs. Workshop participants were invited to explore needs expressed by citizens mapping through senses, signs of presence and action of man. Each participant revised the information collected in a project which expresses a function for the garden, a formal strategy of connection to the city.



Fig. 8: Several examples of workshop designs.



Fig. 9: Spontaneous growth of plants in the garden.

Considering again Clement's theory, participants no more played the role of architect sculptors but that of garden makers with the only purpose to accompany with their own projects transformations already present in that place.

6 FROM THE BRIDGE TO THE GARDEN: A CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION BETWEEN THE CITY AND THE MONUMENT

The "Garden in motion" design and implementation come from several experiences developed in past years in this area. The attention was focused on Musmeci Bridge, an extremely important engineering and architectural artifact, crossing the Basento river, full of symbolic values and historical memory of the city,



completely abandoned today. Under the bridge there is an dismissed industrial area with green spaces, which requires a reconversion. The location of the industrial area on Basento river dates back to post World War II, when some mechanical and steel industries have been located in this zone taking into consideration the proximity of the area with the railroad which connected the city of Potenza with Tyrrhenian and Ionian coasts. The importance of this area is crucial because, due to the worldwide economic crisis, a lot of activities have been abandoned. Consequently the area could be converted to leisure, sports and cultural activities. The motivation is due to the position. This area has a good level of accessibility, it is one of the few flat zones of the city, it is close to Rossellino park, it is close to a Roman bridge (Saint Vito bridge), it is very close to a zone where an important participatory process of reconversion to park of an old pig breeding (Murgante 2012) is on-going and the municipality has also a project of a fluvial park around the Basento river. For this reason, the most important cultural associations of the city, since several years, organize many cultural events in the area to attract media attention to the zone and to remind its importance to the whole city population.



Fig. 10: Shows for children organized in the Garden.

Consequently, important events, such as “Musmeci Art” and the “Festival Città Cento Scale”, have been organized by Basilicata 1799 Association with important companies of aerial dance which have produced choreography for the bridge.

In 2011, for the first time, the attention was moved from the bridge to the context where the bridge is located. Basilicata 1799 Association organized a workshop with the architect Franco Zagari identifying the area under the bridge as a place to "define" a garden according to Gilles Clément's theories.

The attention moved more and more on the idea of participation and how to make the "garden" a recognized place of citizenship: a public space that emphasized the common good.

In this experience attention has been paid to create living environments, coupling nature needs with common requirements of people life. Activities implemented (and that will be realized with network growth) are essentially based on participation, volunteering, low environmental impact and low cost.

7 CONCLUSION

"The garden in motion" develops methods and models of participation that spread an antagonistic culture to the speculative conception of space, waste of energy, environment and landscape depauperation, consumption of human resources promoting common goods. When citizens are involved in decisions about space and time organization of a city, cooperation processes will be generated leading to a collective benefit. The higher is the level of involvement, the greater will be the perceived responsibility towards those spaces, even in future times.

One of the advantages of the project is the possibility to repeat the experience in other places of the city. The local authority can provide only logistical support, without investment of economic resources. The city participates to the design phase selecting proposals, building decorations, cleaning the area where, at the end

of the project, neighbourhood events, cultural events, meetings with a social purpose are organized. Citizens feel responsible for a public place that they have renovated and given back to the city. They also try to live that area by filling it with local culture.

Potenza Municipality does not have large green spaces, nor great cultural and architectural Heritage. In this city poverty rate and social disadvantage have doubled in recent years. Municipality and other local authorities do not have resources to invest, but citizens are willing to participate in building their city. Experiences such “Garden in Motion” replicated in other neighbourhoods can generate processes of public good re-appropriation, very useful for the community: citizens observe, compare and choose, becoming important actors.

8 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Authors are grateful to all workshop participants, Sabrina Bianchi, Hilary Bochicchio, Mariantonietta Bonifacio, Diego Calocero, Giuseppe D'Emilio, Danilo Eduardo, Caterina Fidanza, Antonio Galante, Marilina Giannotta, Marica Grano, Gianleo Gruosso, Rossana Machiella, Ketty Mancaniello, Daniela Mancini, Antonella Nolè, Carmen Peluso, Francesco Pitta, Mara Salvatore, Pierluigi Santopietro, and other members of associations who supported the initiative, Giuseppe Biscaglia, Alberto Petrone, Valentina Russo, Carmela Dacchille.

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